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ABSTRACT

The Founding Fathers of the United States placed great importance on the learning of foreign languages and on excellence in reading and writing English. Sacrifices in the curriculum in favor of English were justified by the desire that Americans speak and write English as well as the British. Above all, the Founding Fathers were concerned with the maintenance of democracy and an educated populace. To protect these values, they encouraged a common education and a break with European models. In the opinion of some, the study of Latin and Greek needed to be deemphasized and the study of modern languages to be promoted because of their value in many fields, especially science. In general, French was the modern language recommended by the founders; Spanish was the second choice. American school curricula have been established and have evolved in patterns appropriate for the United States; they should not be evaluated by European standards. A study of the writings of the Founding Fathers is enlightening for understanding American attitudes toward language study. Plans for the reform of language programs today should consider the views of the Founding Fathers and models should be based on America's own needs. Seventy-eight endnotes are appended. (NSE)

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Susan Lee Pentlin

THE VIEWS OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING FATHERS ON THE STUDY OF THE MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The signers of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were enlightened men. Like their European contemporaries, they believed in natural law, man's inherent goodness, the power of reason, equality among men and the right of everyone to the pursuit of happiness. However, they also recognized the need to adapt these European ideas to American needs. They were embarking on a new venture and realized that new solutions were needed. Thus the Founders asserted in the Declaration of Independence the right of Americans to lay the foundation of their nation "on such principles" and to organize "its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness."[1]

St. John de Crèvecoeur expressed this need for innovation and new approaches in his Letters from an American Farmer, published in 1782. In almost heroic terms, he declared that:

> He is an American, who, leaving behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives ones from the new mode of life he has embraced...the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions.[2]

America was beginning with a fresh start and, in some ways, was thus in a better position to put the principles of the Enlightenment into practice. Goethe once remarked, with apparent envy: "Amerika, du hast es besser, als unser Kontinent, das alte."[3]

Education interested the Founders even before the Revolutionary War. As Enlighteners, they developed principles and designs for American schools and school curriculums and proposed educational reforms, which were distinctly American. A study of the views of the Founding Fathers is therefore needed to understand American attitudes toward language study today.

Like all educated men of their time, these leaders knew

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Latin and Greek and a few, like Madison, Hebrew as well.[4] Franklin, who was largely self-educated, learned Italian while playing chess with a friend and was also a master of Spanish and French.[5] John Adams, remembered, however, that: "he [i.e. Franklin] acknowledged to me, that he was wholly inattentive to grammar."[6] Jefferson paid great attention in his correspondence to the language study of his daughter and nephews and had French, Latin, Greek and Spanish authors in his library.[7] In addition, he studied Anglo-Saxon and was interested in the American Indian languages.[8]

Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician, wrote to a friend: "I take great pleasure in reading Latin authors and have of late read more physic in Latin than ever."[9] He could also read Spanish, French and Italian[10] and was one of the few to attempt German.[11] Adams studied French while he was abroad and later wanted to learn Spanish in a month, but reported with disappointment that:"experience taught Us our Error and that a language is very difficult to acquire especially by Persons in middle life."[12] His son, John Quincy, visited Berlin during the reign of Frederick the Great and eventually learned German so aptly he was able to translate Wieland's Oberon. Today, he is sometimes called "The Father of German Studies in America."[13]

The Founding Fathers thus respected those who knew other languages and valued this ability. They were saddened at times by their own shortcomings. Adams wrote his wife in 1776: "I wish I understood French as well as you...I feel the want of education every Day—particularly of that language."[14] Later, in France, he wrote in his diary: "Je crois qu'on riroit, si on verroit mon francois."[15] Washington lamented his inability at speaking French in a letter to Lafayette in 1779, writing:

> Remember, my good friend, that I am unacquainted with your language, that I am too far advanced in years to acquire a knowledge of it, and that, to converse through the medium of an interpreter upon common occasions, especially with the ladies, must appear so extremely awkward, insipid and uncouth that I can scarce bear it in idea.[16]

On the other hand, the American Fathers found themselves

arguing strongly for the study of the vernacular English, as they considered educational planning and reform. Sometimes, this came at the expense of language study. They made this sacrifice, willingly, because they were convinced that the strength of a democracy lies in the common education of all of its citizens. In 1786, Jefferson wrote to Washington that:

> It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too of the people with a certain degree of instruction.[17]

In his 1749 essay "Proposal Relating to the Education of Youth", Franklin quoted Locke's idea that "They [the Ancients] made it a Part of Education to cultivate their own, not foreign Tongues." In a concluding remark, he observed that:

> Though all should not be compelled to learn Latin, Greek, or the modern foreign languages, yet none that have an ardent desire to learn them should be refused; their English, Arithmetick, and the other studies absolutely necessary, being at the same Time not neglected.[18]

He outlined his views further in an essay "Idea of the English School Sketch'd Out" two years later.[19]

In 1789, shortly before his death, Franklin demanded that the English and Latin schools of the Academy be divided:

> Thus the Time spent in that Study might, it seems be much better employ'd in the Education for such a Country as ours [i.e. language study]; and this was indeed the Opinion of most of the original Trustees.[20]

In his 1749 document, he had emphasized the foreign languages were not absolutely necessary for practical studies.[21]

Rush proposed in an essay, "A Plan for Free Schools," that such schools be established in every township. He advocated: "Let the children who are sent to these schools be taught to read and write the English and (when required by their parents) the German language."[22] Jefferson, too, in his plans for the educational system of Virginia wanted to establish free schools to educate children in English and arithmetic for three years.[23] The importance he placed on English study is evident in remarks he made against a foreign education. He felt this robbed a youth of "those distinctions which eloquence of the pen and tongue ensues in a free society."[24]

These educational planners also feared that, distant from the British Isles, the English language could become vulgarized and Americans would appear to be ignorant and uneducated. Rush admonished the citizens of Philadelphia to:

> Awaken at last to check the vice which taints the atmosphere of our city. The profane and indecent language which assaults our ears in every street can only be restrained by extending education to the children of poor people.[25]

He later added that "Too much pain cannot be taken to teach our youth to read and write our American language with propriety and eloquence".[26] Thus sacrifices in the curriculum in favor of English would be justified.

Clearly, another reason for the early support of English study was the new nation's desire to make a clean break with Britain and Europe as well, to establish a new way of life. Alexander Hamilton explained to Rufus King in 1796 that:

> We are looking hard to establish in the country principles more and more national and free from all foreign ingredients, so that we may be neither 'Greeks nor Trojans' but truly Americans.[27]

Rush warned Philadelphians against "the infection of European vices"[28] and Washington spoke of "avenues to foreign influences" in his "Farewell Address". He advised that:

> [these are] particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot...Against the insidious wiles of foreign influences...the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.[29]

It is also possible that the new nation emphasized English, out of pride and even arrogance at its recent successes. Hamilton asserted in a Federalist paper that:

> The superiority, she [i.e. Europe] has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the Mistress of the World...Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness.[30]

Supreme Court Justice Jay observed: "I fear that the ideas which my countrymen in general conceive of Europe are in many respects rather too high."[31]

As enlightened men, they certainly had another considera-

tion in proposing reforms. Education for the common man alone would support the Republic since it gave all people a chance for happiness, instead of supporting an elite. For this reason, the study of Latin and Greek had been called into question early. The most outspoken opponent was Rush. In 1798, he remarked that: "The study of the Latin and Greek languages is improper in the present state of society and government in the United States."[32] Eliminating them from the required curriculum would open the "avenues of science" to everyone. He felt that language study kept many from entering schools of higher education and helped to create a barrier that would, in fact, "impede the advance of science." This would be "to turn our backs upon a gold mine, in order to amuse ourselves catching butterflies" and would eventually undermine republican government.[33]

Franklin argued, in his 1789 letter to the Academy that the only reason the classical languages were taught was that: "Among the different Nations of Europe...until 3 and 400 years past there were no Books in any other language." For that reason, he considered Greek and Latin studies "le Chapeau bras of modern literature" and added: "Thus the Time spent in that Study might, it seems, be much better employed in the Education for such a Country as ours."[34]

Noah Webster praised English and, like Franklin, he presented logical arguments for support of the vernacular:

> The English language perhaps, at this moment, is the repository of as much learning as one half the languages of Europe. In copiousness, it exceeds all modern tongues...[it] falls very little short of any language in the regularity of its construction...how can a parent be justified in keeping his son several years over rules of syntax which he forgets when he shuts his book.[35]

Jefferson, in considering a site for the University of Virginia said, English "the future vehicle of whatever we may ourselves achieve, and destined to occupy so much space on the globe, claims distinguished attention in American education."[36] Rush predicted that: "It will probably be spoken by more people in the course of two or three centuries, than ever spoke any one

language at one time since the creation of the world."[37] Thus a knowledge of the vernacular was essential.

Adams and Jefferson continued, however, to value the ancient languages as well as modern ones. Rush's strong opinions were apparently not in the majority from the complaints he voiced in his correspondence with Adams, about how much he was hated for his views.[38] His opposition stemmed apparently, in part, from his belief that classical writings were pagan and even indecent[39] and encouraged authoritarian government[40] as well as "monkish learning".[41]

When less emotional, Rush emphasized his preference for the modern languages, because as he explained to Adams: "Were every Greek and Latin Book (the New Testament excepted) consumed in a bonfire the world would be wiser and better for it. All of them that are good for anything are translated into modern languages."[42]

He had, in fact, explained to Adams twenty years earlier that, personally:

> I do not reject the modern languages as a part of academical education. I have found much more benefit from the French than I ever found from the Latin or Greek in my profession...My partiality for those languages is one of the reasons for my having quarreled with the dead languages of Greece and Rome.[43]

Thus the modern languages were viewed as the most practical choice, though it was not until the late nineteenth century that they were, in fact, widely taught in America.

Many educators recognized that a knowledge of languages could be of value in many fields. Webster pointed out the practical applications in business fields:

> Young men designed for the mercantile lines after having learned to write and speak English correctly might attend to French and Italian as such living languages as they will probably want in the course of business.[44]

Franklin recommended that at the Academy:

> All intended for the divinity should be taught the Latin and Greek; for physick, the Latin, Greek and French; for Law, the Latin and French; Merchants, the French, German and Spanish.[45]

Thus languages were chosen on the basis of their serviceability and their occupational value.

In his 1749 plan for the Academy, Franklin wanted the first master called for English or Latin and Greek. However, he also noted that: "The Trustees shall with all convenience speed endeavor to engage persons capable of teaching the French, Spanish and German languages."[46] This seems to have been the first curricular provision for Spanish in American education.[47]

In the Academy's Constitution, Franklin emphasized the languages, referring to courses such as history, geography, logic and mathematics "as matters of Erudition naturally flowing from the languages."[48] Jefferson too believed that languages were the basis of all sciences and he sought, in his studies, proof of the existence of a universal language and grammar.[49]

In his bill to amend the Constitution of William and Mary College, Jefferson recommended oriental and northern languages be taught beyond grammar school, because of their relationship with English. He wanted to appoint a missionary to the Indians to study their languages and establish grammars and vocabularies, but this plan was never realized. He did,however, establish the first professorship of modern languages and was the first to include Anglo-Saxon in a college curriculum in America.[50]

In general, French was the modern language recommended by these Founders. Jefferson and others commented on its practical uses and observed that it was the language of "good manners".[51] Adams waxed enthusiastic in his praise of French, describing the language as:

> A Tongue Sweet and harmonious, a Tongue, useful to Merchants, to Statesmen; to Divines, and especially to lawyers and Travellers; who by the help of it, may traverse the whole Globe; for in this respect, the French language is pretty much now...a universal tongue.[52]

Later he recommended French to his daughter Abagail. He wrote her, advising that:

> ....it is scarcely reputable for young ladies to understand Latin and Greek--French my dear is the language next to English....this I hope you mama will teach you.[53]

Jefferson also encouraged his daughter in her French lessons.[54] Rush, on the other hand, disliked this practice.[55]

Jefferson advised his nephew, Peter Carr, to "push" learning French, because he pointed out, "the books which will be put into your hands...will be mostly French, these sciences being better treated by the French than the English writers."[56] On another occasion, he called French "the repository of human science."[57]

Spanish was generally the second choice in modern language study, due to its perceived relevance. Jefferson recommended that Carr learn Spanish, in addition to French. He wrote his nephew that: "Our future connection with Spanish renders that the most necessary of the modern languages after French."[58] With vision, he wrote in his plan for the University of Virginia that:

> Spanish is highly interesting to us [in America], as the language spoken by so great a portion of the inhabitants of our continents, with whom we shall probably have great intercourse ere long.[59]

Jefferson also pointed out that the greater part of the early works about the early history of American were in Spanish.[60] Rush reported he had found "some advantage from a knowledge of the Italian language" and praised its beauty, but like Jefferson he encouraged Spanish before Italian.[61]

None of the Founders seem to have been skillful in the German language. Rush was perhaps the first to take an interest in the language and make an attempt to learn it.[62] He was a strong spokesman for maintenance of German culture in in Pennsylvania and helped to establish a college at Lancaster for the German citizens of the state.[63] Franklin printed works in German, but apparently did not really know the language.[64]

In his plan for a Federal University, Rush recommended that German and French be the languagestaught. He felt these were the most practical, because of the valuable knowledge which "relates to the advancement of national improvement of all kinds" that was written in these languages.[65] Jefferson also praised German as a language of science and advancement.[66] John Adams was obviously pleased with his son's success in German.

As the Founders differ somewhat over which languages should be studied, they also debated the best method and age of instruction. The American patriots echoed the European philosophers, Locke and Rousseau, as well as the language educator Comenius in their advice and philosophy for language study. The method they generally recommended was the natural or direct method which relies on intuitive learning. Thus their educational ideas mark the beginnings of a modern methodology for language study in the United States.

Rush, who did not favor the study of Greek and Latin as written languages, did on the other hand support an early study of modern languages at school. He once commented that: "The state of the memory, in early life, is favorable to the acquisition of languages, especially when they are conveyed to the mind through the ear." In line with modern linguists, he concluded that: "It is, moreover, in early life only that the organs of speech yield in such a manner as to favor the just pronunciation of foreign languages."[68]

Jefferson agreed that languages should be acquired by ear.[69] He recommended delaying the learning of mathematics until age fifteen and in the early years encouraging language study, since he felt this "is merely a matter of memory."[69] Franklin also favored a study of modern languages prior to ancient ones. He was, furthermore, convinced that a basis for language study could be attained best through an early study of English grammar.[70]

In his autobiography, Rush related how he learned French from an instructor who "strictly forbade me to commend a grammar rules to memory."[71] He learned the language by reading, writing and translating. Eventually, "by referring to its [i.e. French's] rules, at the time" he needed them, "they adhered to memory without the least act of [his] will to imprint them there." He was also convinced that his instructor "was a man of genius" though he had been doubtful at first.[72]

Reminiscent of Martin Luther, Jefferson recommended that languages be learned <u>en scène</u> when possible. He wrote his

nephew, Thomas Mann Randolph, that the best method of learning French "would be to fix yourself in some family where there are women and children...You will learn to speak better from women and children in 3 months, than from men in a year."[73]

With humor, Adams wrote in his diary in 1779 that:

> ...if such a man's character would admit of it, there is much of the language to be learned at the shop. The female shopkeepers are most chatty in the world...are very complaisant—talk a great deal—speak pretty good French.[74]

In another entry, he reported he had heard that to take a mistress or go to the Comédie were the best ways to learn the language.[75] He further claimed that if he were to return to France, he would constantly go out among the people and to the taverns. This, together with the best grammars and dictionaries, would be the successful way to learn French.[76] Jay believed, however, that a competent knowledge of the language could be acquired in America.[77]

Thus, the Founding Fathers placed great importance on the learning of modern languages, but never to the detriment of the vernacular. They did not encourage all young people to learn languages, nor did they argue that it was necessary in every way of life. Above all, they were concerned with the maintenance of democracy and an educated populace. To protect these, they encouraged a common education and a breaking away from European models. They felt the greatest value in modern language study lay in the practicality of the languages for America and for the advancement of science.

It is often observed that American knowledge of foreign languages is pathetic.[78] To understand American attitudes toward language study, however, a study of the writings of the Founding Fathers is needed. American programs should not be evaluated by European standards. American school curriculums have been established and evolved in patterns appropriate for this country. Plans for the reform of language programs today must consider, therefore, the views of the Founding Fathers and models, based on America's peculiar needs, be developed.

ENDNOTES

[1]Declaration of Independence (1776), sec.2.

[2]Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from An American Farmer (London, 1782; rept. London: Dent & Sons, 1912), pp. 43, 44.

[3]Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Zahme", Xenien, IX, 2.

[4]Saul K. Padover,ed., The World of the Founding Fathers:Their Basic Ideas on Freedom and Self-Government (New York: Yoseloff, 1960), p. 31.

[5]James W. Hillesheim and George D. Merrill, Theory and Practice in the History of American Education: A Book of Readings (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Goodyear Publishing, 1971), p. 107.

[6]John Adams, Diary and Autobiography, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1961), IV, 59.

[7]Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (Cambridge: Harvard, 1931), pp.4-5.

[8]Honeywell, pp. 113-114.

9. Benjamin Rush, Letters, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Princeton, New Jersey: American Philosophical Society, 1951), I, 17.

[10]Rush, I, 531.

[11]Rush, I, 14, 16, 9n.

[12]Adams, IV, 201.

[13]Anneliese Harding, ed., John Quincy Adams: Pioneer of German-American Literary Studies: Essays on the Occasion of an Exhibition of Documents, Manuscripts, Books and Prints in the Rare Book Exhibit Room (Boston: The Goethe Institute, c. 1979). See essay by Walter J. Morris, "The Father of German Studies in America—John Quincy Adams," pp. 68-86.

[14]Adams Family Correspondence, L.H. Butterfield, ed. (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap, 1963), I, 349.

[15]Adams, II, 306.

[16]Padover, p. 585.

[17]quoted in Honeywell, p. 13.

[18]quoted in Benjamin Franklin on Education,John Hardin Best,ed. New York: Teachers College, 1962), pp. 136, 146.

[19]Best,p165-171.

[20]"Observations Relative to the Intentions of the Original Founders of the Academy in Philadelphia," in Best, p. 174.

[21]Best,p.146.

[22]Padover, p. 518.

[23]"A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" in Hillesheim, pp. 125-131.

[24]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Press, 1950 et seq.), VIII, 637.

[25]Padover, p. 518.

[26]Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in Essays on Education in the Early Republic, Frederick Rudolph, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1965), p. 18.

[27]"Maxims and Brief Opinions" quoted in Padover, p. 223.

[28]Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode", p. 23.

[29]In Padover, p. 568.

[30]The Federalist, Jacob E. Cooke, ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan, 1961), 72-73.

[31]John Jay. The Winning of the Peace: Unpublished Papers 1780-1784, Richard B. Morris, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), II, 474.

[32]Benjamin Rush, "Observations upon the Study of the Latin and Greek Languages, As a Branch of Liberal Education, With Hints of a Plan of Liberal Instruction, Without Them, Accomodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States," quoted in Liberalism and American Education, Allen Oscar Hausen, ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1926), p. 52.

[33]Rush, "Observations upon the Study of the Latin...", p. 53.

[34]Best, pp. 172, 174.

[35]Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America," in Rudolph, p. 45.

[36]Thomas Jefferson, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia, August 1, 1818," in Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education, James B. Conant, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 132.

[37]"Plan of a Federal University" in Runes, p. 93.

[38]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 1114.

[39]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 946.

[40]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 1007.

[41]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 1114.

[42]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 1066.

[43]Letters of Benjamin Rush, p. 531.

[44]Rudolph, p. 55.

[45]"Proposal Relating to the Education of Youth," in Best, p. 146.

[46]"Constitutions of the Publick Academy in the City of Philadelphia," in Best, p. 156.

[47]Sturgis E. Leavitt, "The Teaching of Spanish in the United States," in The Modern Language Association of America, Reports of Surveys and Studies in the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages (New York, 1959-1961), p. 310.

[48]"Constitutions," in Best, p. 153.

[49]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, see as example "Letter to James Madison" (12 January 1789), XIV, p. 436.and in "Notes on the State of Virginia" in Gordon C. Lee,ed. Crusade Against Ignorance. Thomas Jefferson on Education (New York: Teachers College, 1961), p. 95.

[50]Honeywell, 113-114.

[51]Frequent comment in the works of Adams, Jefferson, Franklin and others. Washington told Dr. Boucher in 1771 that "to be acquainted with the French Tongue is to become a part of polite Education," in Padover, p. 585.

[52]Adams Family Correspondence, I, 3.

[53]Adams Family Correspondence, I, 349.

[54]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, XVI, 208 and others.

[55]"Thoughts upon the Mode of Education," in Rudolph, p. 34.

[56]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, VIII, 408.

[57]"Report of the Commissioners," in Conant, p. 132.

[58]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, VIII, 408.

[59]"Report of the Commissioners," in Conant, p. 132.

[60]"Letter to Peter Carr," in Conant, p. 145.

[61]Letters of Benjamin Rush, I,531.

[62]Letters of Benjamin Rush, I, 14; 16, 9n.

[63]"To the Citizens of Pennsylvania of German Birth and Extraction: Proposal of a German College," in Letters of Benjamin Rush, I, 364-368.

[64]Edwin H.Zeydel, "The Teaching of German in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present," in The Modern Modern Language Association, Trends, p. 288.

[65]Writings of Benjamin Rush, 103.

[66]"Report of the Commissioners," in Conant, p. 132

[67]J.A. Comenius (1592-1670), Moravian bishop who directed educatom toward an active classroom.

[68]"Thoughts upon the Mode," in Rudolph,pp. 18, 34.

[69]The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, XV, 204.

[70]"On the Need for an Academy," in Best, p. 135,

[71]George W. Corner, ed. The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His

"Travels through Life" together with his Commonplace Book for 1789-1813 (Princeton, New Jersey: The American Philosophical Society, 1948), p. 42-43.

[72]Corner, Autobiography, p. 42-43.

[73]Papers of Thomas Jefferson, II, 557.

[74]Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, II, 361.

[75]Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, II, 370.

[76]Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, II, 361.

[77]John Jay, Morris,ed., II, 474.

[78]See Strength Through Wisdom: The Report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (U.S. Printing Office, 1979).